

March 2007

I am out of the studio and teaching again. I really enjoy my alone time in the studio but also know I need to put my nose out into the real world once in a while. Now I need to balance the two!

This month I want to talk about drawing, accurate, careful drawing.

Good technical drawing skills must become part of the artist's subconscious. This will free the mind to concentrate on accurate observation; the movement of the hand holding the pencil should be controlled by the subconscious.

Singers and dancers would never consider beginning a performance without a warm up period, as artists it is very helpful to practice the skills of line, tone and hatching, waking the subconscious mind before beginning to work. You should also practice drawing circles, cubes, cylinders and spheres: the basic shapes of which all other forms are composed. Practice drawing these shapes using simple clean lines only, never hatched or searching lines. You cannot practice too much, it is what your mind does when you do not have a pencil and paper. It is what your hand does when you have a pencil and paper. There is no judgment of 'perfection' it is just the action of 'doing' that counts.

As Robert Beverly Hale says: "As soon as you are able to produce the symbols of the simple forms (basic shapes) you will realize that you have learnt the most important "words" of the visual language. Draw a cube and you have a cubical box; (the stem of any plant in the mint family) draw a cylinder and you have a column; (the stem of a tulip) draw a sphere and you have a tennis ball; (cut the top of the sphere off and you have the basic shape of a tulip flower). With these simple symbols you can represent thousands of things. And by combining these forms, you can create an infinite variety of objects."

When you are drawing, it is important to cultivate the habit of seeing everything as a simple basic shape or combination of basic shapes.

This process enables you to see and feel the mass first rather than focusing too soon on the surface detail.

Now you are ready to sketch – NOT draw.

I feel very strongly writing about the subject before beginning to draw is essential. We spend most of lives in the verbal side of our brain.

Throughout our lives we see, or think we do and these 'seeings' go into a memory bank. But this are NOT accurate observations. When a familiar subject is chosen, there is a tendency to draw mostly from this 'seeing' memory, what you have stored in memory from past quick seeing, rather than from accurate visual observation of the subject currently in front of you. The writing process is when the observation begins, use your eyes to observe, use your fingers to touch, to feel the textures to, feel the delicacy, to feel the shine. Identify the parts, count them. Describe the colors, and patterns created by different pigments. Observe and write about how, where the subject grows/lives.

Now sketch with a pencil or pen, but DO NOT use an eraser to make corrections. If you are not satisfied with a result, do it again. The sketching process is fast, each image should take no more that 30 seconds or less. Turn the subject constantly. A teacher friend asked her students to create a minimum of 90 sketches of a flower before beginning the drawing process! I can guarantee if you write and then sketch the drawing process will be MUCH easier.

Now you are ready to draw.

I prefer to draw on good quality tracing vellum rather than on paper. I never draw on the paper on which I will be doing the final rendering, as using an eraser will damage the paper surface. If I am not happy with how a drawing is progressing I will just put the tracing aside and begin again. I try to limit the use of my eraser. If I am not drawing well it is because I have not spent enough time observing. I go back to observing, and try the drawing again later.

The resulting drawing will not have any surface tone, just the edge contour lines. When the drawing is finished put it aside for a day or so.

When you return to it be sure that you can understand it, if there is even the smallest line that appears ambiguous the viewer will not understand what you mean. Before a drawing is ready to paint it has to be 'right' each line fully explained. I attempt to make every step in the creative process complete in itself. If I stop at the outline stage the drawing will be complete and fully understood by the viewer.

Work from the 'anatomy' of the subject first, layering step by step from the inside out, as if the object is transparent, finally rendering the surface detail. I have set in my subconscious that a bad drawing becomes and even worse painting. You cannot make it right with paint.